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# Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition



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# Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition: Introduction



Have you ever wondered why some pictures are more appealing than others . . .



... why some are left hanging in galleries for months or even years to be enjoyed by thousands?

## Highlights

A screenshot of a website page titled "Camera Hobby Photography eBook". The page features a large image of a wooden boardwalk through a lush green forest. Below the image, there's a summary of the book's contents, including sections on cameras, lenses, filters, and accessories. A prominent "Buy Now" button is visible at the bottom right.

**Lesson 3: Energy and Directed Attention**

A line-oriented starting point for creating interesting compositions is to draw lines. Imagine that the area of your photograph is divided into four quadrants by two intersecting vertical lines and three intersecting horizontal lines. One vertical and one horizontal line, in fact, are the boundaries of the frame itself. Now, consider where any of the lines created by this imaginary grid or any of the intersections.





Have you ever wondered why some photographers consistently win the praises of judges and critics?



One of the main reasons why some pictures are more outstanding than others is because of their strong composition. That's what this program is all about. We're going to consider how composition can improve your photographs.



Good composition is a subject with a history of its own. The Greeks and Romans were practicing it 2,000 years before photography! It's obvious in their architecture.



And today, composition continues as an important part of contemporary architecture. One definition for photographic composition is simple: the pleasing selection and arrangement of subjects within the picture area.



Some arrangements are made by placing figures or objects in certain positions. Others are made by choosing a point of view. You can shift your camera very slightly and make quite a change in composition.

Some snapshots may turn out to have good composition, but most good pictures are created. How do you create a picture? First learn the guidelines for good composition.



After you've learned the guidelines, you'll realize that well-composed pictures often take careful planning and sometimes patient waiting.

You'll find that the composition guidelines will become part of your thinking when you're looking for pictures, and soon they will become second nature to you.

In this program, we'll discuss:

- Simplicity
- The Rule of Thirds
- Lines
- Balance

- [Framing](#)
- [Avoiding Mergers](#)

Think of these not as rules but as simple guidelines



Photographic composition is an expression of your natural sense of design. These guidelines will help you sharpen your natural sense of composition and take better pictures.



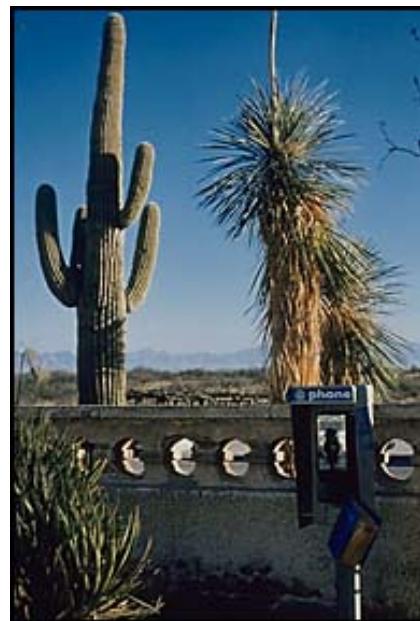
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# Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition: Simplicity

The first and perhaps the most important guideline is **simplicity**. Look for ways to give the center of interest in your pictures the most visual attention. One way is to select uncomplicated backgrounds that will not steal attention from your subjects.



Telephone?  
Bridge?  
Cactus?

Let's see how we can improve this photo by looking for visual simplicity. First let's decide if we want our center of interest to be the public telephone, the bridge, or the cactus.

## Highlights

The image shows the front cover of a book titled "Camera Hobby Photography e-Book" by Brian J. Smith. The cover features a photograph of a wooden boardwalk path leading through a lush green forest. The title and author's name are printed at the top in a white, sans-serif font.

**Lesson 3: Emphasis for the Amateur Photo Voter**

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**Lesson 3. Energy and Directed Attention (cont'd)**

A one-hundred starting point for creating interesting compositions is shown here. Imagine that the area of your frame is divided into a grid of nine equal-sized squares, with spaced vertical lines and three evenly spaced horizontal lines. One way to obtain focus is to arrange the most important of your subjects so they fall within one or more of the boxes directed by this imaginary grid, or onto any of the intersections.



Diagram for the 3x3 grid effect.



We chose the cactus as the main subject. And by moving in closer and using the plain sky as the background, we have simplified and improved the appearance of this photograph.



We're certainly close enough to our subject in both pictures, but the busy background on the left camouflages the seagull. Just change your point of view slightly and, presto, your seagull stands with visual prominence against the blue sky.



Compose your photograph so that your reason for taking the picture is clearly seen. Arrange other parts of the picture area in such a way as to complement what you choose to be the center of interest. Most of us would prefer the picture on the right because the parking lot tends to contradict the feeling of antiquity related to this mission.



Remember: we're talking about composition simplicity, and here's another decision you'll probably have to make. How much of your subject should you include, and should it be framed horizontally as we have done here?



Or perhaps you'd prefer to frame your subject in the vertical format, as we've indicated with these frame lines. The choice is yours.



So, you can simplify your pictures and strengthen your center of interest by selecting uncomplicated backgrounds, avoiding unrelated subjects, and moving in close. If you want to make your center of interest even more dynamic, place it slightly off center in your frame as we have done with this young artist.



Generally, pictures with subjects directly in the center tend to be more static and less interesting than pictures with off-center subject placement.



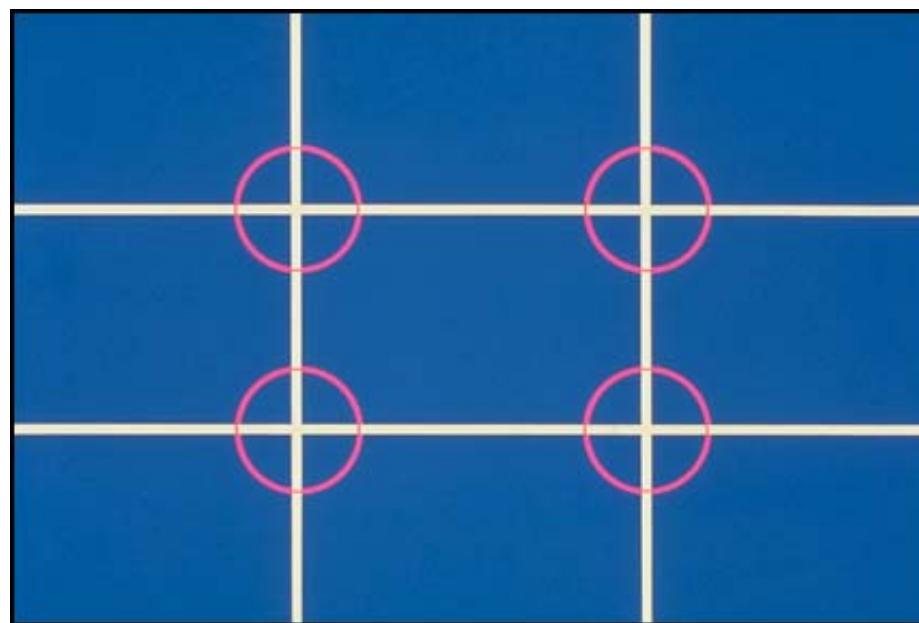
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# **Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition: Rule of Thirds**

You can use the **rule of thirds** as a guide in the off-center placement of your subjects. Here's how it works.



Before you snap the picture, imagine your picture area divided into thirds both horizontally and vertically. The intersections of these imaginary lines suggest four options for placing the center of interest for good composition. The option you select depends upon the subject and how you would like that subject to be presented.

## Highlights

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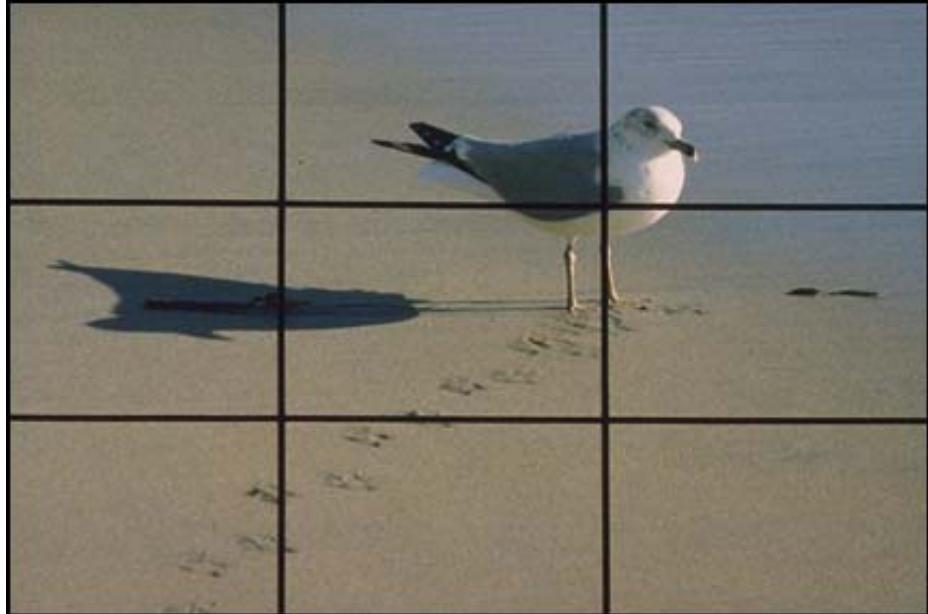
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Diagram showing a 3x3 grid overlay on a landscape photograph.



We picked the upper-right position for this subject so that we could see the full shadow and most of the tracks that lead to the seagull.



The lighthouse seems well placed in the upper right just because the rest of the scene fits nicely into the format.



Here's a case where you have excellent subject control. You can have the model pose anywhere along the walkway. The rule of thirds indicates this placement which also gives the model a definite path to follow within the picture area.



You should always consider the path of moving subjects and, generally, leave space in front of them into which they can move.



If you don't, here's what can happen! This jogger looks like she's going to run right out of the picture.



By placing the subject in the lower-left position, we've used the rule of thirds and given the jogger plenty of room to run within the picture.



Here's another action shot where it's important to leave more space in front of a moving subject than behind it.



You can also apply the rule of thirds guidelines to the placement of the horizon in your photos. Here the center position of the boat and horizon results in a static feeling.



Let's move the horizon to the upper third and the sailboat to the left. Remember, these are the only guidelines. So if you don't like this subject placement, try another.



Like this. We've moved the horizon line to the lower third. In general, place the horizon high or low in your scenics, but rarely in the middle.



Just as it's usually best to place horizons off center, it's also best to place verticals off center. For instance, in the picture on the left, the subject is centered, but on the right, the photographer got a more effective photograph by simply changing the viewpoint.



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# Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition: Lines

**Lines** also play an important role in composition. This sculpture has some beautiful lines, but they're obscured by the busy background. Let's simplify this picture by moving our camera viewpoint in close to the base of the sculpture.



Now we can look up and see the lines against a clear blue sky. The picture on the right is much more dynamic because of the strong diagonal lines.

## Highlights

The image shows the front cover of a book titled "Camera Hobby Photography e-Book" by Brian J. Smith. The cover features a photograph of a wooden boardwalk path leading through a lush green forest. The title and author's name are printed at the top in a white, sans-serif font.

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**Lesson 3. Energy and Directed Attention (cont'd)**

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Diagram of a 3x3 grid overlay on a landscape photograph.



Diagonal  
lines  
are  
**DYNAMIC!**

Imagine this view without the diagonal rays of sunlight and you'll probably agree:  
diagonal lines are dynamic!



You can use diagonals as leading lines to provide a way into the picture. It's a simple and easy path for the eye to follow to the main subject.



You can also use repetitive lines to draw viewers' attention to your center of interest.



One of the most common and graceful lines used in composition is called the S curve.



Here's another S curve that forms a diagonal leading line. This picture is also improved with a well-placed center of interest, and the result is a photograph that's easy to look at.



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# Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition: Balance



Here's what we're looking for. The flamingo has relaxed, and his neck now forms a pleasing S curve against a better background. So, the S curve is an attractive shape to look for when you compose a photograph.



## Highlights

The image shows the front cover of a digital book titled "Camera Hacks Photography e-Book". The cover features a photograph of a wooden boardwalk path leading through a dense green forest. The title is at the top in a white sans-serif font, and the author's name, "Diane Young", is at the bottom right.

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**Lesson 3. Energy and Directed Attention (continued)**

A three-hourimer is starting point for creating interesting compositions to draw the eye. Imagine that the area of interest is a rectangle divided into nine equal squares by two equally spaced vertical lines and three equally spaced horizontal lines. One way to think about this is to imagine the major areas of your composition as being the nine squares of any of the boxes created by this imaginary grid or any sets of the intersections.

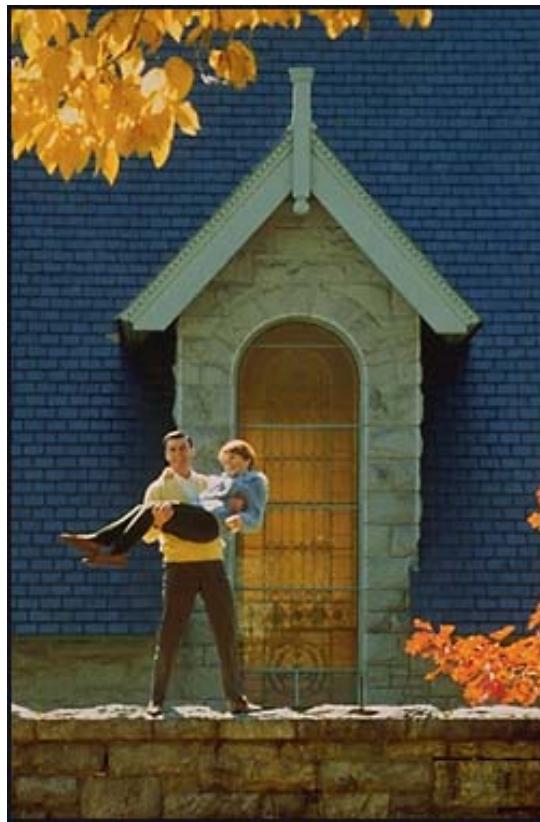


Image by Dale Cutler

You can use other simple geometric shapes to help your picture composition. Can you see the triangle you get by connecting imaginary lines between the three nuns? This triangle adds strong visual unity to this picture.



Notice how many triangles are formed by this couple and their reflections. You can help yourself develop an artistic eye by studying pictures to find the strength of their lines, geometric shapes, and balance.



Achieving good **balance** is another one of our guidelines for better picture composition. Notice how the leaves, the window, and the couple all seem to be in the right place. The camera viewpoint and subject placement were all carefully selected to create this well-balanced photograph.



Good balance is simply the arrangement of shapes, colors, or areas of light and dark that complement one another so that the photograph looks well-balanced, not . . .



. . . lopsided like this. Karen looks like she's going to fall right out of the picture due to lack of visible support.



Now we've moved our camera viewpoint and have included the much-needed wheel to support our subject. Karen is still off center, but the picture is balanced.



Imagine that these two couples are standing at either end of a pair of scales. They are evenly balanced, so this is a classic example of symmetrical balance.



Here's an example of nonsymmetrical balance. The large single head balances the smaller child on the right. In general this type of balance is more interesting to look at than symmetrical balance.



For example, this is a balanced photograph, but the subjects can be separated into two vertical pictures-which tends to divide the viewer's attention.



There are usually several ways to arrange or balance your subjects. You may choose the style on the left because you'd like to convey a feeling of formality—or you may prefer the more relaxed informal pose. They're both well balanced.



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# Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition: Framing

Our fifth guideline for improving photographic composition is **framing**.



No, this is not what we mean by framing, although the principle is the same.



## Highlights

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**Lesson 3. Energy and Directed Attention (cont'd)**

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Diagram showing a 3x3 grid overlay on a landscape photograph.

What we mean is to frame the center of interest with objects in the foreground. This can give a picture the feeling of depth it needs to make it more than just another snapshot.



Whether or not you use a frame for a picture will depend on each new subject. What you choose as a frame for the scene will, of course, vary as well.



The Washington Monument on the left is composed in the center without a frame. The picture on the right has a stronger feeling of depth and tells a more complete story because the photographer chose an appropriate foreground to complement the Washington Monument.



The horses and their riders add considerable foreground interest to this scene. The overhanging tree branches complete the frame and add depth to the subject. When you use people for scale and foreground, make sure they look into the picture area.



Both of these interpretations of the Iwo Jima Monument effectively use framing for added dimension and interest. No matter what subjects you choose to photograph, you should avoid mergers.



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# Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition: Avoiding Mergers

The merger of this tree with Dave's head is so obvious, you probably think no one could avoid seeing it before snapping the shutter. Remember: we see things in three dimensions, so it's easier than you might guess to focus our eyes on the principal subject only and not see that background at all. **Avoiding mergers** is our sixth guideline for better composition.



You can be sure the camera always sees mergers, so look for plain backgrounds before you pose your subject. In this case the correction was simple because the two settings were only a few feet apart.

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**Lesson 3. Energy and Directed Attention (cont'd)**

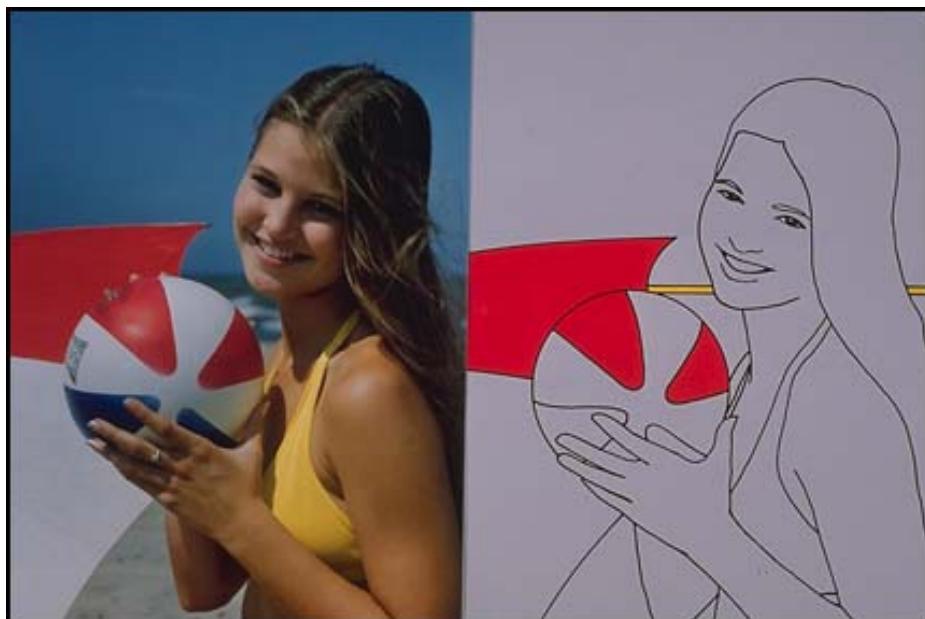
A one-hundred starting point for creating interesting compositions is shown here. Imagine that the area of your frame is divided into a grid of nine equal-sized squares, with spaced vertical lines and three evenly spaced horizontal lines. One way to obtain focus is to arrange the most important of your subjects so they fall within one or more of the boxes directed by this imaginary grid, or onto any of the intersections.



Diagram for the 3x3 grid effect.



This is a fun picture, but when we cut people in half or trim their heads or feet, we've committed a border merger. This is often caused by poor alignment of the photographer's eye in the camera viewfinder. To avoid border mergers, line your eye up squarely behind the viewfinder and adjust the picture format to leave a little space around everyone.



Near mergers may not be quite as objectionable, but they can steal attention from your center of interest. Near mergers are objects or lines that are just too close to the principal subject. In this case the ball and umbrella tip are near mergers.



Let's correct these mergers by using a low angle, and we'll use only one prop for simplicity. Make sure the Frisbee is held far enough away from Karen's face to avoid another near merger. Well, those are the six guidelines for better photographic composition.

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## Guidelines for Better Photographic Composition: Discussion



Now let's look at a few prizewinning photos and see why the judges gave them such high scores. In this picture titled *Afternoon Chat*, the photographer arranged the subjects in a simple, well-balanced composition. He also made good use of diagonal lines. Remember, of course, that these are only guidelines; so you can bend or even break them and still create fine photographs . . .

### Highlights

**Camera Hobby Photography e-Book**

Table of Contents

- Camera & Camera Body, Anatomy of a Camera
- Camera Lenses
- Camera Flash
- Camera Filters
- Camera Software, Utilities, etc.
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- Camera Filters
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- Camera Accessories

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*Dale May*

**Lessons in Composition for the Amateur Photographer**

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**Lesson 3. Energy and Directed Attention (continued)**

A two-tiered strategy point for creating interesting compositions is to make sure that the area of your image is divided into nice visual portions by three strong vertical lines and three strong horizontal lines. One way to do this is to position the major elements of your composition so that they fall either into any of the areas defined by this imaginary grid, or onto any of the intersections.

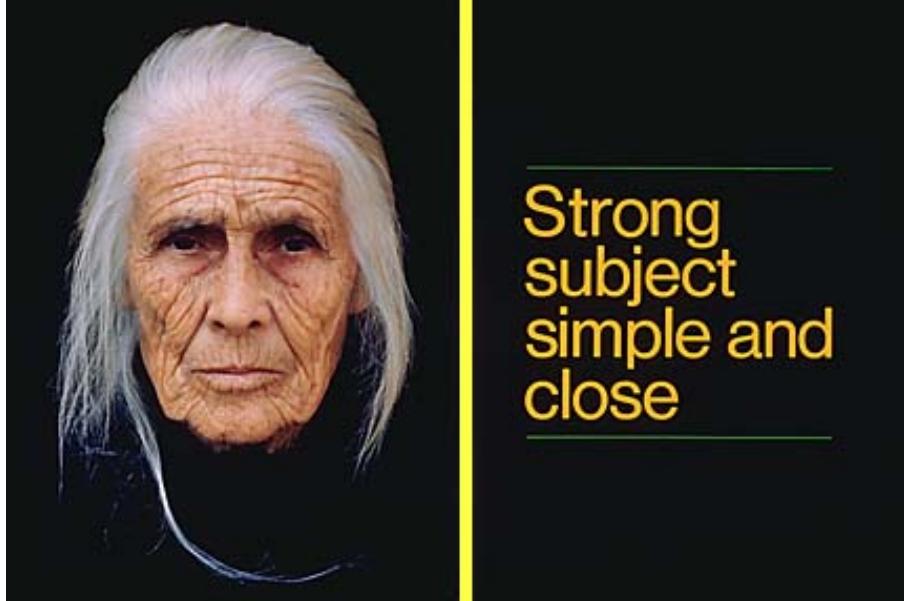


Figure 3.6 Rule of Thirds Grid

**Composition Refresher**

The following section is designed to give you a quick refresher on some basic composition concepts. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to composition, but rather to serve as a quick reference for those who are new to the field or need a reminder of some basic principles.





## Strong subject simple and close

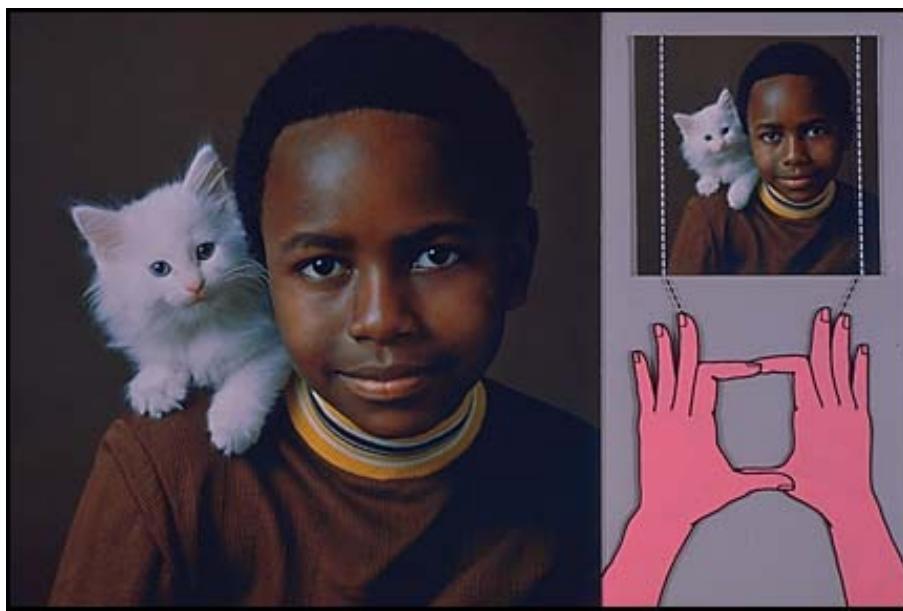
. . . like this. The photographer actually strengthened this prizewinner by ignoring a few guidelines and composing this subject in the center of the format. The strength of the subject and the simple black background make this one work.



Here's another winner. Why? Well because it's an extremely interesting picture that makes good visual sense, and that's just as important as our list of guidelines. The chances are you'll use only a few guidelines at a time. For instance, this picture of a frog is an excellent example of a close-up. It makes good use of simplicity and, despite its centrally placed horizon, it has viewer impact.



**Impact** - here it is again. This has that elusive quality called human interest. So be an opportunist and capture these fleeting moments even if you overlook a few guidelines. You can make some corrections after you take the picture. For instance, you can trim or enlarge just a portion of your pictures as we've indicated here with these cropping lines.



This picture is cropped to a square format. Is that really the way you'd like it? To see if you'd like to change its proportions, hold your hands out in front of you and try cropping this as a vertical. You've probably seen artists do this. Now try a horizontal cropping. This is a good way to look at pictures, improve them, and develop your photographic eye.



## Horizontal cropping

Here's a simple cropping guideline. Include the portions of your subject that you feel are most interesting and important. For instance, you may like this portrait of Pat in a square format, or cropped to a horizontal.



## Vertical cropping

However, many people prefer portraits of individuals that are cropped vertically. The subjects seem to fit better. The choice, of course, is yours.

### What Do You Think?



Here's a photograph that has simplicity and a strong center of interest. The photographer composed it with plenty of extra space around the subject to permit a variety of print croppings. How would you crop this picture-horizontal or vertical? And where would you place the center of interest?



Do the flags contribute to the composition of this picture? Are those flags really needed? To find out, hold a pencil up in front of you and block out the flaps. Can you explain why the flags help or hinder good composition?



Which of these views do you prefer? Can you explain why?

Can you explain the compositional strength or weaknesses of these next three photos? Use some of the guidelines we've mentioned and add some of your own reactions to these photographs.





You can use your talents in photographic composition in many different ways.  
**Now it's your turn.**